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Changing consumption and production patterns

Report of the Secretary-General

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INTRODUCTION

1. This report reviews progress made in the implementation of the objectives set out in chapter 4 of Agenda 21, on changing consumption and production patterns. 1/ The report was prepared by the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development as task manager for chapter 4 of Agenda 21, in accordance with arrangements agreed by the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development. It is the result of consultation and information exchange between designated focal points in United Nations agencies, international organizations, government officials and a range of other institutions and individuals. In addition, the report benefited from a number of inter-sessional meetings, especially the Rosendal Workshop on Sustainable Production and Consumption (2-4 July 1995), which was organized by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Norwegian Ministry of Environment, and the Workshop on Policy Measures for Changing Consumption Patterns (30 August-1 September 1995), hosted by the Government of the Republic of Korea.

2. The report is structured in accordance with the five elements of the work programme adopted by the Commission at its third session: 2/

(a) Identifying the policy implications of projected trends in consumption and production patterns;

(b) Assessing the impact on developing countries, especially the least developed countries and small island developing States, of changes in consumption and production in developed countries;

(c) Evaluating the effectiveness of policy measures intended to change consumption and production patterns, such as command-and-control, economic and social instruments, government procurement policies and guidelines;

(d) Eliciting time-bound voluntary commitment from countries to make measurable progress on those sustainable development goals that have an especially high priority at the national level;

(e) Revision of the United Nations guidelines for consumer protection.

3. The present report provides a brief overview of key issues in each element of the work programme, draws policy-relevant conclusions and presents a number of recommendations for consideration by the Commission. The addendum to this report provides supporting information and more in-depth analysis of the key issues.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

4. Consumption and production are the essence of economic activity; they involve the utilization of natural resources, their transformation into products and services and their ultimate disposal or dissipation into the environment as wastes. Traditionally, as economies expand, overall levels of resource use and waste generation rise.

5. It is now widely believed that modern consumption patterns are not compatible with long-term sustainability. In the 1960s and 1970s, concerns centred around the belief that economic growth was inherently limited by the finite nature of fossil fuel energy, minerals and other non-renewable resources. This "no-growth" position has since been largely discredited on the grounds that it failed to give due weight to the ability of markets to stimulate technological substitutes as scarcities emerged. Concern has now shifted to other potentially limiting factors, notably:

(a) The degradation of renewable resources, particularly agricultural land;

(b) The accelerating rate of species loss;

(c) The accumulation of emissions and wastes in the environment, with negative consequences for human health and possible ecological impacts, many of which represent largely unknown risks.

6. Agenda 21 states that "the major cause of the continued degradation of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries" 3/ and calls on developed countries to take the lead in promoting and achieving more sustainable consumption patterns.

7. The policy response to the challenge set by Agenda 21 has been twofold. The main focus of attention continues to be on production and the traditional polluting sectors of industry, transport and agriculture. In addition to command-and-control regulation of processes and products, much innovative policy research and development now centres on creating an incentive framework for the more efficient utilization of resources and the development of closed-loop production/consumption systems that prevent the escape of wastes into the environment. The concept of eco-efficiency, which is concerned with maximizing the productivity of energy and material inputs in order to reduce resource consumption and pollution/waste per unit output, is currently seen as a promising short- to medium-term strategy, appropriate in both developed and developing countries, for maintaining economic growth and competitiveness while achieving improved environmental quality (the double dividend).

8. However, many policy makers recognize that changing consumption and production patterns will involve going beyond policies targeted on producers and intended to encourage eco-efficient practices in production. In the longer term, progress will depend on more fundamental changes in the lifestyle of consumers in developed countries. This is mainly because (i) consumers represent the demand side of the economy, and their preferences and choices to a large extent determine the behaviour and output of other economic agents; and (ii) the Western consumer lifestyle currently serves as a model and inspiration to millions of people in poorer countries.

9. Achieving sustainable development at a global level will depend critically on the development trajectory followed by developing countries whose current consumption levels are relatively very low. It is therefore essential that richer nations be able to demonstrate that resource-efficient, low-pollution lifestyles are both feasible and desirable. At the same time, their efforts to

change current consumption and production patterns must not hinder the development prospects of developing countries - for example, through the creation of new barriers to trade.

A. Identifying the policy implications of trends and projections in consumption and production patterns

10. The latest data available indicate that industrialized countries are achieving greater efficiency in their use of energy and some materials. The rate of increase in energy, metals and minerals use has slowed - becoming delinked from rising gross domestic product (GDP) levels - but these productivity gains have been largely offset by volume growth, and absolute consumption levels are still rising. Other production and consumption patterns show no signs of delinking. Water use, paper production and consumption, and waste generation continue to rise approximately in line with GDP; transport (vehicle numbers and distances travelled) in some OECD countries is growing at rates above GDP growth.

11. Developing countries, with the exception of some in sub-Saharan Africa and many economies in transition, are experiencing much higher rates of economic growth than the developed economies and their rates of resource consumption are increasing accordingly. It is clear that, in terms of regional shares of the global ecospace, economic and population growth will ensure that within a few decades developing countries will catch up and overtake the North in key areas - for example, energy use and related emissions. However, on a per capita basis, the consumption gap between developed and developing countries is still very wide; even on favourable assumptions about economic growth in developing countries, great inequities in individual consumption levels and living standards will persist for many decades.

Conclusions and recommendations

12. Key problems relating to trend analysis include lack of understanding (ignorance of socio-economic and environmental systems, uncertainty surrounding policy intervention) and inadequate information management (poor or uncoordinated information collection, processing and presentation). A particular weakness relates to understanding the interlinkages between economic activities and their social and environmental impacts, which can be distant in space and time (though the knowledge base concerning the relationship between human activities and climate change has improved significantly in recent years (see the report of the Secretary-General on chapter 9 of Agenda 21 (Protection of the atmosphere) (E/CN.17/1996/2))).

13. This report is based on the best available data relating to key inputs and outputs (energy, water, metals and minerals, forest and food products, selected pollutants and waste volumes) in production and consumption. The Commission may wish to note that the Secretariat has begun an initiative to cooperate with other relevant United Nations organizations and research institutes in the development of a modelling framework that will enable long-term projections of socio-economic and environmental trends at the global and, in some cases, regional level. The modelling framework will draw on the work of the Department

r Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis of the United Nations cretariat and on other relevant analytical and modelling studies carried out United Nations organizations and others. The modelling framework will luminate interlinkages between the driving forces of change, economic, social d environmental impacts and the potential effects of alternative policy terventions. The modelling framework is intended to assist decision makers in fferent economic and social circumstances in assessing the relative urgency of oblems at the national and international level and in evaluating the plications of different policy options.

. From the wealth of recent activities and studies concerning sustainable nsumption and production, a consensus is emerging that industrialized country olicies should first focus on improving the efficiency of energy and material lows and reducing their harmful impacts. Eco-efficiency is winning acceptance n government and industry as a politically and economically feasible strategy or modifying unsustainable consumption and production patterns. The scope for educing pollution, waste and unnecessary resource use through technological nnovation in products and processes is great and underexploited.

5. The Commission may wish to note that the eco-efficiency approach e-emphasizes the need for increased research and investment in clean, efficient echnologies and increased efforts to disseminate these technologies in both eveloped and developing countries (see the report of the Secretary-General on hapter 34 of Agenda 21 (Transfer of technology) (E/CN.17/1996/13)).

6. Apparently unsustainable trends in resource use and pollution are the esult of both levels and characteristics (patterns) of production and onsumption. These are in turn determined by a complex of driving forces nvolving demographics, wealth, technology, social and physical infrastructures, nd culture. In order to increase understanding of these forces and their mpacts on consumption and production, the Commission may wish to encourage Governments to support work programmes being developed by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and OECD for implementation in collaboration with other relevant governmental and non-governmental organizations. The programmes aim, respectively, to identify sociocultural changes that could lead to more sustainable consumption and production patterns and to improve understanding of the behavioural component of individuals' consumption decisions and thereby to provide insights for formulating and implementing policies intended to modify individual decisions.

B. Assessing the impact on developing countries, especially the least developed countries and small island developing States, of changes in consumption and production in developed countries

17. Governments in many developed countries are implementing policies intended to change aspects of consumption and production: policy approaches include measures to promote waste minimization, improve energy and materials efficiency, ban or control certain hazardous substances and promote the purchase of materials/products perceived as being more environmentally friendly. Many large companies, especially those with transnational operations, are implementing

environmental management systems and pollution prevention programmes. In addition to planned measures, broader trends in technological development, culture and socio-economic behaviour may also be expected to result in significant changes in consumer lifestyles and production practices.

18. These changes are of increasing concern to developing countries seeking to maintain or expand their export markets for raw materials, semi-processed goods or finished products. For example, cradle-to-grave assessment of products and processes, favoured by some policy makers and companies, raises the possibility of inappropriate environmental demands being applied to developing country exports at an early phase of their life cycle (see the report of the Secretary-General on chapter 2 of Agenda 21 (Trade, environment and sustainable development) (E/CN.17/1996/8)).

Conclusions and recommendations

(i) Identifying the problem

19. At present, the potential impacts of changes in industrialized country consumption and production patterns on developing countries are unclear. It should also be noted that the long-term effects of some major changes - which are proceeding largely independently of government action, for example, the impending communications revolution - remain highly speculative and controversial even in countries leading their development. Assessing possible impacts on developing countries will be equally difficult.

20. It seems likely that policy-making in the short and medium term will continue to favour an eco-efficient approach. However, eco-efficient product and process changes, such as closing product loops, dematerialization and design for recycling, are still largely under development as leading-edge concepts. If they should develop into more mainstream practices in industrialized countries, a stabilization or decline in demand for a wide range of raw materials could, in theory, follow. This issue is now on the research agenda of United Nations organizations and government agencies, academic institutions and NGOs. The Commission may wish to urge Governments to support existing and proposed work programmes of United Nations organizations, notably the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and other relevant organizations, which seek to analyse the impacts of specific policy measures on economic sectors of particular importance to developing countries - for example, textiles, leather production, wood and wood products.

(ii) Mitigating potentially adverse impacts

21. Eco-labelling schemes have caused concern as a potential trade barrier: surveys and studies by UNEP and UNCTAD indicate that, worldwide, few exporters feel directly affected but that small producers exporting to the European Union are concerned over possible costs. There is a need for internationally agreed criteria and labels for specific products, such as tropical timber, though such criteria will not be possible across all product categories.

22. At the international level, the most urgent priority appears to be coordination of different national eco-labelling programmes in order to minimize costs for producers targeting a variety of markets. This problem has been addressed by UNCTAD, which proposes general principles for the design of eco-labelling programmes. They include transparency of programme design, mutual recognition, equivalence (flexibility over means of achieving environmental objectives) and technical assistance to exporters seeking to meet eco-label requirements. The Commission may wish to draw the attention of Governments to these proposed principles and recommend that they should form the basis of further discussion with a view to minimizing costs to exporters in developing countries and economies in transition.

23. The new series of Environmental Management Standards being developed by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO 14000 series) is also causing concern. The culture of management system standards is now well established, and it is likely that when the new ISO 14000 standards are issued (scheduled for mid-1996), they will spread more quickly than did the ISO 9000 series of quality management standards. Developing country suppliers will face increasingly widespread demands for third party certification to ISO standards on environmental management systems and auditing.

24. The Commission may wish to draw the attention of Governments and United Nations organizations to the operational recommendations resulting from an expert group meeting convened by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). Developing country experts stressed inter alia the need for international recognition of national and regional accreditation bodies from developing countries by a system of peer review, as well as international support for education of government and industry association officials on accreditation of certification bodies and for training of accreditation and certification auditors from developing countries. International support at the enterprise level should focus on programmes to help small and medium-sized enterprises to acquire expertise in environment and quality management (see the report of the Secretary-General on chapter 34 of Agenda 21 (Transfer of technology) (E/CN.17/1996/13)).

(iii) Exploiting potentially positive impacts

25. The Commission may wish to note that moves towards more environmentally friendly consumption in industrialized countries will also present opportunities for developing countries. Studies by UNCTAD conclude that there is considerable scope for exploiting market opportunities for environmentally preferable products (EPPs), such as agricultural fibres for use in construction and organically grown foods. Successful development of such markets will depend on overcoming problems relating to the price competitiveness of EPPs, lack of technical and environmental information and appropriate marketing strategies.

26. A range of government agencies and organizations are currently addressing different links in the environmentally preferable product chain from point-of-production to end-user. For example, a number of national environment ministries and research institutes are developing product policies that seek to define environmentally friendly products and encourage their use. Some Governments are developing criteria for "greener" procurement relating to

products. UNCTAD is currently investigating policy incentives to promote market access for environmentally preferable products, and a number of NGOs and small business organizations are active in promoting the purchase of such products by households and individuals. Enhanced coordination of these efforts could contribute to more rapid development and exploitation of markets by developing country suppliers of environmentally superior products.

27. The Commission may wish to encourage Governments to support activities that aim at the improvement and dissemination of information on the technical and environmental merits of EPPs and facilitate contacts between producers and users/consumers of EPPs, especially those produced by least developed countries and small island developing States.

C. Evaluating the effectiveness of policy measures intended to change consumption and production patterns

28. Regulation still forms the basis of controls on production (supply side measures). Command-and-control has proved effective in relation to certain kinds of product development, especially through its technology forcing role: substance bans/controls have led to materials substitution (CFC-free products), standard-setting has improved the energy efficiency of many domestic appliances (cookers, refrigerators). However, command-and-control measures can be inflexible, costly and inefficient at the implementation, inspection and enforcement phases of the policy cycle. These problems are encouraging greater interest in regulatory instruments and voluntary agreements which extend producers' responsibility for their operations and products while leaving many details of implementation to industry.

29. A major development in sustainable production and consumption policy thinking is the increased emphasis on demand side measures, intended to influence the behaviour and purchasing decisions of consumers (individuals, enterprises and Governments). Since regulation is often inappropriate in these areas, attention is focused on the use of economic instruments and social instruments (information, codes of conduct, voluntary programmes). To date, product taxes and deposit refund schemes have been the most relevant instruments for changing consumption patterns; relatively little action has been taken in the area of social instruments but this situation may be expected to change.

Conclusions and recommendations

30. Information concerning national experience of different policy instruments and packages of instruments is insufficiently disseminated; there is a need for improved exchange of information between policy makers on the lessons learned regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of policy approaches under different economic, environmental and cultural circumstances.

31. The Commission may wish to encourage national Governments and relevant United Nations and other organizations with good knowledge of policy development and implementation to establish or contribute to an information clearing-house for case-studies on policy instruments and their impacts. Such a clearing-house might operate on a new or existing World Wide Web (WWW) site, with specific

inputs being provided by government officials, academics and NGOs. It could simultaneously serve as a source of information for Governments and other stakeholders at the national level and analysis by the Commission.

32. Methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness of policy instruments, particularly with a view to drawing conclusions that are valid across national boundaries, remain problematic. Evaluation criteria usually include costs, efficiency, environmental outcomes and distributive effects, but measurement parameters and valuation techniques are controversial.

33. The Commission may wish to urge Governments to increase their efforts to develop and use social cost-benefit analyses of policy proposals; such analyses should aim to provide policy makers with a more complete picture of economic, social and environmental costs and benefits over the long term. Improved understanding of the implications of policy measures would assist in rational priority-setting and allocation of limited resources and would establish a firmer foundation for societal debate on the choices and trade-offs involved in the sustainable development process.

34. Policy makers' interest in applying demand side measures to change production and consumption patterns raises questions regarding the effectiveness and legitimacy of government action to influence people's aspirations and lifestyles. In addition, at a practical level, it is more difficult for policy to target many individual consumers than relatively few producers. However, the end-user approach has demonstrated its effectiveness: provision of energy management services has reduced the need for increases in generating capacity in the United States of America, for example. It is also empowering, releasing the potential of voluntary action, citizen participation and other non-governmental initiatives. If Governments wish to encourage behaviour change through demand side measures, they will need to enlist the support of intermediaries, such as financial institutions, educators, churches, charities and other voluntary organizations, NGOs and business associations, which can develop and transmit sustainable consumption and production messages appropriate to their own constituencies.

35. The Commission may wish to take note of the recommendation of the recent United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Workshop on Education and Public Awareness for Sustainable Development which called on the Commission on Sustainable Development, in cooperation with UNESCO, UNDP, national Governments and other relevant stakeholders, to explore ways and means to reach individual households with information on practical ways to implement sustainable development in their role as consumers.

36. It seems likely that achieving significant shifts in consumption and production patterns will, in the longer term, require more stringent measures, in particular, greater internalization of environmental costs in the price of goods and services. Information and education will be essential to foster a climate of acceptance, in which people understand why such measures are necessary and are aware of the wider benefits that can follow.

37. The Commission may wish to recommend that sustainability issues be given greater emphasis at every level of national education systems and that

particular efforts be made to target important decision makers outside the formal education system, such as women in the home (see the report of the Secretary-General on chapter 36 of Agenda 21 (Promoting education) (E/CN.17/1996/14)).

38. Current patterns of, and trends in, consumption and production are the result of complex economic, cultural and institutional arrangements that have developed over time. Policy instruments intended to change these patterns and trends must therefore address economic, cultural and institutional factors in a simultaneous and consistent manner. There is growing recognition among policy makers that strategies to change consumption and production patterns must involve an instrument mix that seeks to tackle the entire complex of socio-economic driving forces. Policy instruments that attempt to control isolated impacts of unsustainable production and consumption patterns, rather than their causes, are less likely to succeed in the long term.

39. The Commission may wish to urge Governments to undertake and support further analysis of the socio-cultural determinants of consumption and production behaviour, which are less well understood than economic driving forces, in order to develop packages of instruments that, in politically acceptable ways, address the multiple factors underlying unsustainable consumption and production patterns and that are mutually reinforcing in their effects.

40. In conclusion, the Commission may wish to note that, historically, major socio-economic changes (comparable to the scale of change required to restructure production and consumption in industrialized countries) have occurred as a response to perceived opportunities (for example, widespread availability of affordable cars) not to government prescription. Policy-making can capitalize on this fact: policies will be most effective when they correctly identify significant trends (the socio-economic "revolutions in the making") and seek explicitly to reinforce desirable elements of change and to discourage undesirable elements. Major trends driven by market forces can be deflected but rarely stopped; an incremental policy approach may therefore, over the long term, achieve more than seeking to implement comprehensive consumption and production patterns.

41. For this reason, the Commission may wish to encourage Governments to increase their use of integrated modelling and scenario-building in policy development, in order to present alternative pictures of the future, based on unchanged government policies and a range of possible policy interventions.

D. Progress made in implementing voluntary commitments to achieving sustainable development goals that have an especially high priority at the national level

42. Agenda 21 indicated the need to focus policy attention on "the demand for natural resources ... and ... the efficient use of those resources consistent with the goal of minimizing depletion and reducing pollution". 4/ It established the principles of common but differentiated responsibilities of industrialized and developing countries in achieving sustainable development and

made clear the responsibility of the developed countries for examining and changing their own consumption and production levels.

43. Many developed countries have now introduced or are in the process of introducing take-back requirements on producers and importers, which may be expected to accelerate the trend towards higher recycling levels for materials, including paper, paperboard, glass, ferrous and non-ferrous metals and some plastics. In countries with long-established return schemes, growth rates in specific waste streams, notably packaging, have been slowed and may even be reversed. However, the greatest gains in materials efficiency continue to flow from commercially driven technological innovation in industry.

44. Virtually all industrialized countries, and many developing countries, have energy efficiency/energy conservation programmes in place. Actions include information campaigns, assistance packages to industrial and commercial users and demonstration schemes or other support for energy-efficient buildings, heating and lighting systems and appliances. The persistence of historically low world energy prices, and of energy subsidies in many countries, continues to undermine these efforts; while energy intensity has declined in the developed world, absolute consumption has risen (see E/CN.17/1996/5/Add.1, sect. I). Subsidy removal and internalization of environmental costs in the price of fuel appears essential to further progress on energy efficiency goals.

45. Sustainable development remains high on the agenda of leading international and national enterprises. The past year has seen rapid development in the fields of environmental management systems, auditing and reporting and voluntary codes and standards. Such concepts as industrial ecology, integrated life cycle management and ecodesign are increasingly well known but nave yet to be disseminated beyond a limited number of players who are primarily based in developed countries. This fact reinforces the need for technical cooperation and information-sharing between supplier and purchaser companies if eco-efficient practices are to become the dominant form of production in industrialized and developing countries.

Conclusions and recommendations

46. The Commission, at its third session, adopted a decision urging Governments to report to it on the implementation of recommendations considered to be the most appropriate to their national needs and circumstances.

47. There is a need for a more comprehensive overview of progress that takes into account different national priorities and policy objectives within the broad production and consumption agenda. The overview should provide a systematic review of progress achieved by developed countries on such key issues as energy and materials efficiency and should illustrate in a more general manner changes in production and consumption patterns in developing countries that contribute to environmentally and socially sustainable economic development.

48. Work is currently under way to develop an information base on government policies and actions by major groups in order to report to the Commission on new developments and to assess the impacts and effectiveness of new measures over

time. The information base will be organized to identify key objectives of sustainable consumption and production and to report on broad strategies adopted to achieve them, specific characteristics and implementation challenges presented by different economic sectors and the policies and actions adopted by Governments and other major actors to address them.

49. Such progress reports should avoid the need for additional reporting at the national level; the Commission may wish to urge close cooperation, coordinated by the United Nations Secretariat, among a wide range of organizations currently engaged in relevant information-gathering and analysis exercises. For example, the Commission may wish to note that OECD intends to include consumption and production patterns in its policy performance reviews, beginning in 1996; similar evaluations may be incorporated in the peer review process conducted by the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) for its member countries with economies in transition. The World Bank is considering the establishment of a database on national environmental policy measures. International industry organizations, NGOs engaged in environment/development work, and regional banks and commissions are all potentially valuable sources of information that may wish to contribute to the international knowledge base regarding consumption and production patterns.

E. Revision of the United Nations guidelines for consumer protection

50. In line with the recommendation of the Commission at its third session and Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/53 of 28 July 1995, the decision has been taken to revise the 1985 United Nations guidelines for consumer protection to take account of new issues that have emerged in the intervening 11 years, including sustainable consumption.

51. The Secretariat is now coordinating a process to prepare a revised version of the guidelines, with the aim of presenting draft guidelines relating to sustainable consumption for review by the Commission. It is expected that the draft guidelines will be recommended for adoption by the General Assembly, through the Economic and Social Council.

52. The Commission may wish to note the important role that has been played by the existing guidelines in influencing the development of national consumer legislation and to endorse the potential of the current revision process for promoting the principles of sustainable consumption at the national level and in fostering consumer understanding of the issues.

53. It is important that the guidelines be relevant to countries at different stages of development and applicable internationally; the revision process will need to take account of the interests of a wide variety of stakeholders. Consumers International (formerly the International Organization of Consumers Unions) is taking a lead role in a wide-ranging consultation process that will lead to a draft for consideration in the intergovernmental bodies. The Commission may wish to urge Governments, consumer organizations, NGOs and other interested actors to support Consumers International in the consultation process and to contribute their views on the revised draft of the guidelines.

Notes

1/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8), resolution I, annex II.

2/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1995, Supplement No. 12 (E/1995/32), chap. I, sect. A, para. 45.

3/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, vol. I, ... annex II, para. 4.3.

4/ Ibid., para. 4.5.